





LETTER

OF

DR. WILLIAM E. CHANNING

TO

JAMES G. BIRNEY.

CINCINNATI:

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BOSTON, NOVEMBER 1st, 1836.

MY DEAR SIR,

I have not the pleasure of knowing you personally; but your history and writings have given me an interest in you which induces and encourages me to address you with something of the freedom of acquaintance. I feel myself attracted to the friends of humanity, and freedom, however distant; and when such are exposed by their principles to peril, and loss, and stand firm in the evil day, I take pleasure in expressing to them my sympathy and admiration. The first accounts which reached me of the violence which drove you from Cincinnati inclined me to write to you; but your "Narrative of those riotous proceedings," which I have lately received and read, does not permit me to remain longer silent. The subject weighs much on my mind. I feel that I have a duty to perform in relation to it, and I cannot rest till I yield to this conviction till I obey what seems to me the voice of God. I think it best, however, not to confine myself to the outrage at Cincinnati, but to extend my remarks to the spirit of violence and persecution, which has broken out against the Abolitionists through the whole country. This, I know, will be more acceptable to you, than any expression of sympathy with you as an individual. You look beyond yourself to the cause which you have adopted, and to the much injured body of men, with whom you are associated.

It is not my purpose to speak of the abolitionists as abolitionists. They now stand before the world in another character, and to this I shall give my present attention. Of their merits, and demerits as abolitionists, I have formerly spoken. In my short work on Slavery, I have expressed my fervent attachment to the great end to which they are pledged, and at the same time my disapprobation of their spirit and measures. I have no disposition to travel over this ground again. Had the abolitionists been left to pursue their object with the freedom which is guaranteed to them by our civil institutions; had they been resisted only by those weapons of reason, rebuke, reprobation which the laws allow, I should have no inducement to speak of them again either in praise or censure. But the violence of their adversaries has driven them to a new position. Abolitionism forms an era in our history, if we consider the means by which it has been opposed. Deliberate, systematic efforts have been made not once or twice, but again and again, to wrest from its adherents that liberty of speech and the press, which our fathers asserted unto blood, and

which our national and state governments are pledged to protect as our most sacred right. Its most conspicuous advocates have been hunted and stoned, its meetings scattered, its presses broken up, and nothing but the patience, constancy, and intrepidity of its members have saved it from extinction. The abolitionists then not only appear in the character of champions of the colored race. In their persons the most sacred rights of the white man, and the free man have been assailed. They are sufferers for the liberty of thought, speech and the press, and in maintaining this liberty amidst insult, and violence they deserve a place among its most honored defenders. In this character I shall now speak of them.

In regard to the methods adopted by the abolitionists of promoting emancipation, I might find much to censure; but when I regard their firm, fearless assertion of the rights of free discussion, of speech and the press, I look on them with unmixed respect. I see nothing to blame, and much to admire. To them has been committed the most important bulwark of liberty, and they have acquitted themselves of the trust like men and Christians. No violence has driven them from their post. Whilst in obedience to conscience, they have refrained from opposing force to force, they have still persevered amidst menace, and insult in bearing their testimony against wrong, in giving utterance to their deep convictions. Of such men, I do not hesitate to say, that they have rendered to freedom a more essential service, than any body of men among us. The defenders of freedom are not those, who claim and exercise rights which no one assails, or who win shouts of applause by well turned compliments to liberty in the days of her triumph. They are those, who stand up for rights which mobs, conspiracies, or single tyrants put in jeopardy; who contend for liberty in that particular form, which is threatened at the moment by the many or the few. To the abolitionists this honor belongs. The first systematic effort to strip the citizen of freedom of speech they have met with invincible resolution. From my heart I thank them. I am myself their debtor. I know not that I should this moment write in safety, had they shrunk from the conflict, had they shut their lips, imposed silence on their presses, and hid themselves before their ferocious assailants. I know not where these outrages would have stopped, had they not met resistance from their first destined victims. The newspaper press, with few exceptions, uttered no genuine indignant rebuke of the wrong-doers, but rather countenanced by its gentle censures the reign of Force. The mass of the people looked supinely on this new tyranny under which a portion of their fellow-citizens seemed to be sinking. A tone of denunciation was beginning to proscribe *all* discussion of slavery; and had the spirit of

violence, which selected associations as its first objects, succeeded in this preparatory enterprise, it might have been easily turned against any and every individual, who might presume to agitate the unwelcome subject. It is hard to say, to what outrage the fettered press of the country, might not have been reconciled. I thank the abolitionists, that in this evil day, they were true to the rights which the multitude were ready to betray. Their purpose to suffer, to die, rather than surrender their dearest liberties, taught the lawless, that they had a foe to contend with, whom it was not safe to press, whilst, like all manly appeals, it called forth reflection and sympathy in the better portion of the community. In the name of freedom, and humanity I thank them. Through their courage, the violence, which might have furnished a precedent fatal to freedom, is to become, I trust, a warning to the lawless, of the folly as well as crime of attempting to crush opinion by Force.

Of all powers, the last to be entrusted to the multitude of men, is that of determining what questions shall be discussed. The greatest truths are often the most unpopular, and exasperating; and were they to be denied discussion, till the many should be ready to accept them, they would never establish themselves in the general mind. The progress of society, depends on nothing more, than on the exposure of time-sanctioned abuses, which cannot be touched without offending multitudes, than on the promulgation of principles which are in advance of public sentiment and practice, and which are consequently at war with the habits, prejudices, and immediate interests of large classes of the community. Of consequence, the multitude, if once allowed to dictate, or proscribe subjects of discussion, would strike society with spiritual blindness, and death. The world is to be carried forward by truth, which at first offends, which wins its way by degrees, which the many hate and would rejoice to crush. The right of free discussion is therefore to be guarded by the friends of mankind, with peculiar jealousy. It is at once the most sacred, and the most endangered of all our rights. He who would rob his neighbor of it, should have a mark set on him as the worst enemy of freedom.

I do not know that our history contains a page, more disgraceful to us as freemen, than that which records the violences against the abolitionists. As a people, we are chargeable with other and worse misdeeds, but none so flagrantly opposed to the spirit of liberty, the very spirit of our institutions, and of which we make our chief boast. Who, let me ask are the men, whose offences are so aggravated that they must be denied the protection of the laws, and be given up to the worst passions of the multitude? Are they profligate in principle and life, teachers of impious, or servile doctrines, the enemies of

God and their race? I speak not from vague rumour, but from better means of knowledge when I say, that a body of men and women more blameless than the abolitionists in their various relations, or more disposed to adopt a rigid construction of the Christian precepts, cannot be found among us. Of their judiciousness and wisdom, I do not speak; but I believe, they yield to no party in moral worth. Their great crime, and one, which in this land of liberty is to be punished above all crimes, is this, that they carry the doctrine of human equality to its full extent, that they plead vehemently for the oppressed, that they assail wrong-doing, however sanctioned by opinion, or entrenched behind wealth and power, that their zeal for human rights is without measure, that they associate themselves fervently with the Christians and philanthropists of other countries against the worst relics of barbarian times. Such is the offence, against which mobs are arrayed and which is counted so flagrant, that a summary justice, too indignant to wait for the tardy progress of tribunals, must take the punishment into its own hands.

How strange in a free country that the men from whom the liberty of speech is to be torn, are those who use it in pleading for freedom, who devote themselves to the vindication of human rights! What a spectacle is presented to the world by a republic, in which sentence of proscription is passed on citizens, who labour, by addressing men's consciences, to enforce the truth, that slavery is the greatest of wrongs! Through the civilized world, the best and greatest men are bearing joint witness against slavery. Christians of all denominations, and conditions, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, are bound in a holy league against this most degrading form of oppression. But in free America, the language which despots tolerate, must not be heard. One would think, that freemen might be pardoned, if the view of fellow-creatures stripped of all human rights should move them to vehemence of speech. But whilst on all other subjects, the deeply stirred feelings may overflow in earnest remonstrance, on slavery the freemen must speak in whispers, or pay the penalty of persecution for the natural utterance of strong emotion.

I am aware, that the outrages on the abolitionists are justified or palliated by various considerations; nor is this surprising; for when did violence ever want excuse? It is said, that abolitionism tends to stir up insurrection at the South, and to dissolve the Union. Of all pretences for resorting to lawless force, the most dangerous is the *tendency* of measures or opinions. Almost all men see ruinous tendencies in whatever opposes their particular interests, or views. All the political parties which have convulsed our country, have seen tendencies to national destruction in the principles of their oppo-

nents. So infinite are the connexions and consequences of human affairs, that nothing can be done in which some dangerous tendency may not be detected. There is a tendency in arguments against any old establishment to unsettle all institutions, because all hang together. There is a tendency in the laying bare of deep-rooted abuses to throw a community into a storm. Liberty tends to licentiousness, government to despotism. Exclude all enterprises which may have evil results, and human life will stagnate. Wise men are not easily deterred by difficulties, and perils, from a course of action, which promises great good. Especially when justice, and humanity cry aloud for the removal of an enormous social evil, it is unworthy of men, and Christians, to let the imagination run riot among possible dangers, instead of rousing every energy of mind to study how the evil may be taken away and the perils which accompany beneficial changes may be escaped.

As to the charge brought against the abolitionists of stirring up insurrection at the South,—I have never met the shadow of a proof that this nefarious project was meditated by a single member of their body. The accusation is repelled by their characters and principles as well as by facts; nor can I easily conceive of a sane man giving it belief. As to the “tendency” of their measures to this result, it is such only as we have seen to belong to all human affairs, and such as may easily be guarded against. The truth is, that any exposition of Slavery, no matter from whom it may come, may chance to favor revolt. It may chance to fall into the hands of a fanatic, who may think himself summoned by Heaven to remove violently this great wrong; or it may happen to reach the hut of some intelligent daring slave, who may think himself called to be the avenger of his race. All things are possible. A casual, innocent remark in conversation, may put wild projects into the unbalanced, or disordered mind of some hearer. Must we then live in perpetual silence? Do such chances make it our duty to shut our lips on the subject of an enormous wrong, and never to send from the press a reprobation of the evil? The truth is, that the great danger to the slave-holder, comes from slavery itself, from the silent innovations of time, from political conflicts and convulsions and not from the writings of strangers. I readily grant that the abolitionists, in consequence of their number and their systematic and public efforts, are more likely to be heard of by the slave, than a solitary individual who espouses his cause. But when I consider, how steadily they have condemned the resort to force on the part of the oppressed; when I consider what power the master possesses of excluding incendiary influences, if such are threatened from abroad; when I remember, that during the late

unparalleled excitement at the South, not a symptom of revolt appeared; and when to all this, I add the strongly manifested purpose of the free states to put forth their power, if required, for the suppression of insurrection, it seems to me that none but the most delicate nerves can be disturbed by the movements of the abolitionists. Can any man, who has a sense of character, affect to believe, that the tendency of abolitionism to stir up a servile war, is so palpable, and resistless, as to require the immediate application of Force for its suppression, as to demand the substitution of mobs for the action of law, as to justify the violation of the most sacred right of the citizen?

As to the other charge, that the measures of the abolitionists endanger our National Union, and must therefore be put down by any and every means, it is weaker than the former. Against whom has not this charge been hurled? What party among us has not been loaded with this reproach? Do we not at the North almost unanimously believe, that the spirit and measures of Nullification have a direct and immediate tendency to dissolve the Union? But are we therefore authorized to silence the nullifier by violence? Should a leader of that party travel among us, is he to be mobbed! Let me farther ask, how is it, that the abolitionists endanger the Union? The only reply, which I have heard is, that they exasperate the South. And is it a crime to exasperate men? Who then so criminal as the Founder and primitive teachers of our faith? Have we yet to learn, that in cases of exasperation the blame is as apt to lie with those who take, as with those who give offence? How strange the doctrine, that men are to be proscribed for uttering language which gives offence, are to be outlawed for putting their neighbours into a passion! Let it also be considered, that the abolitionists are not the only people who exasperate the South. Can the calmest book be written on Slavery, without producing the same effect? Can the Chief Justice of Massachusetts expound the constitution and laws of that commonwealth according to their free spirit, and of course in opposition to Slavery, without awakening indignation? Is not the doctrine, that Congress has the right of putting an end to Slavery in the District of Columbia, denounced as fiercely as the writings and harangues of abolitionists? Where then shall mobs stop, if the crime of exasperating the South is so heinous as to deserve their vengeance? If the philanthropist, and Christian must be silenced on the subject of Slavery, lest they wound the sensitive ears of the South, ought the judge, and legislator to be spared? Who does not see that these apologies for lawless force, if they have any validity, will bring every good man under its iron sway?

In these remarks you learn my abhorrence of the violence offered

to the abolitionists, and my admiration of the spirit they have opposed to it. May they vindicate to the end the rights which in their persons have been outraged. Allow me now to express my earnest desire and hope, that the abolitionists will maintain the liberty of speech and the press, not only by asserting it firmly, but by using it wisely, deliberately, generously, and under the control of the severest moral principle. It is my earnest desire, that they will exercise it in the spirit of Christians and philanthropists, with a supreme love of truth, without passion, or bitterness, and without that fanaticism which cannot discern the true proportions of things, which exaggerates or distorts whatever favors or conflicts with its end, which sees no goodness except in its own ranks, which shuts itself up in one object, and is blind to all besides. Liberty suffers from nothing more, than from licentiousness, and I fear that abolitionists are not to be absolved from this abuse of it. It seems to me that they are particularly, open to one reproach. Their writings have been blemished by a spirit of intolerance, sweeping censure, and rash injurious judgment. I do not mean to bring this charge against all their publications. Yours, as far as I have seen them, are an honorable exception, and others, I know, deserve the same praise. But abolitionism in the main, has spoken in an intolerant tone, and in this way has repelled many good minds, given great advantage to its opponents, and diminished the energy, and effect of its appeals. I should rejoice to see it purified from this stain.

Abolitionism seems to me to have been intolerant towards the slave-holders, and towards those in the free states who oppose them, or who refuse to take part in their measures. I say, first, towards the slave-holder. The abolitionist has not spoken, and cannot speak against slavery too strongly. No language can exceed the enormity of the wrong. But the whole class of slave-holders often meets a treatment in anti-slavery publications which is felt to be unjust, and is certainly unwise. We always injure ourselves in placing our adversary on the footing of an injured man. One groundless charge helps him to repel many which are true. There is indeed a portion of slave-holders who deserve the severest reprobation. In every such community, there are many who hold their fellow creatures in bondage for gain, for mere gain. They perpetuate this odious system not reluctantly, but from choice, not because the public safety compels them, as they think, to act the part of despots, but because they love despotism, and count money their supreme good. Provided they can be supported in ease and indulgence, can be pampered, and enriched, they care not for the means. They care not what wrongs or stripes are inflicted, what sweat is extorted, what powers of the immortal

soul are crushed. For such men no rebuke can be too severe. If any vehemence of language can pierce their consciences let it be used. The man who holds slaves for gain, is the worst of robbers, for he selfishly robs his fellow-creatures not only of their property, but of themselves. He is the worst of tyrants, for whilst absolute governments spoil men of civil, he strips them of personal rights. But I do not, cannot believe that the majority of slave-holders are of the character now described. I believe that the majority, could they be persuaded of the consistency of emancipation with the well-being of the colored race and with social order, would relinquish their hold on the slave, and sacrifice their imagined property in him to the claims of justice, and humanity. They shrink from emancipation, because it seems to them a precipice. Having seen the colored man continually dependant on foreign guidance and control, they think him incapable of providing for himself. Having seen the laboring class kept down by force, they feel as if the removal of his restraint would be a signal to universal lawlessness and crime. That such opinions absolve from all blame those who perpetuate slavery, I do not say. That they are often strengthened by the self-interest of the master, I cannot doubt, for we see men every where grasping and defending doctrines which confirm their property and power. I acknowledge too, that the ready, unhesitating acquiescence of the slave-holder in such loose notions, especially at the present moment, is a bad symptom. In the present age, when a flood of light has been thrown on the evils of slavery, and when the whole civilized world cries out against it as the greatest of wrongs; and in this country, where the doctrine of human rights has been expounded by the profoundest minds, and sealed with the best blood, a fearful responsibility is assumed by masters, who, pronouncing emancipation hopeless, make no serious, anxious enquiry after the means of accomplishing it, and no serious effort to remove the supposed unfitness of the slave for freedom. Still while there is much to be condemned in the prevalent opinions, and feelings at the South, we have no warrant for denying to all slave-holders moral and religious excellence. The whole history of the world shows us, that a culpable blindness in regard to one class of obligations, may consist with a sincere reverence for religious and moral principles, as far as they are understood. In estimating men's characters we must never forget the disadvantages under which they labor. Slavery, upheld as it is at the South, by the deepest prejudices of education, by the sanction of laws, by the prescription of ages, and by real difficulties attending emancipation cannot easily be viewed in that region as it appears to more distant and impartial observers. The hatefulness of the system ought to be strongly exposed, and

it cannot be exposed too strongly, but this hatefulness must not be attached to all who sustain slavery. There are pure and generous spirits at the South, and they are to be honored the more for the sore trials amidst which their virtues have gained strength. The abolitionists in their zeal, seem to have overlooked these truths in a great degree, and by their intolerance towards the slave-holder, have awakened towards him sympathy rather than indignation, and weakened the effect of their just invectives against the system which he upholds.

I think too that they are chargeable with a like intolerance towards those in the free states, who oppose them, or who refuse to participate in their operations. They have been apt to set down opposition to themselves as equivalent to attachment to slavery. Regarding their own dogma's as the only true faith, and making their own zeal the standard of a true interest in the oppressed, they have been apt to cast scornful looks and reproaches on those who have spoken in doubt or displeasure of their movements. This has made them many foes. They have been too belligerent to make friends. I do not mean in these remarks, that the abolitionists have had nothing to blame in their opponents. Among these are not a few deserving severe reprobation, and I have no desire to shield them from it. But the great mass, who have refused to take part in the anti-slavery movement, have been governed by pure motives. If they have erred, they have not erred willingly, or from the influence of low and servile passions. They have consequently been wronged by the treatment they have received, at the hands of Abolitionists, and men are not brought over by wrongs to a good cause.

I have said that I have no desire to shield the unworthy among ourselves. We have those whose opposition to Abolitionism has been wicked, and merits reprobation. Such are to be found in all classes, forming indeed a minority in each, yet numerous enough to deserve attention, and to do much harm. Such are to be found in what is called the highest class of society, that is, among the rich, and fashionable, and the cause is obvious. The rich, and fashionable belong to the same caste with the slaveholder, and men are apt to sympathise with their own caste more readily than with those beneath them. The slave is too low, vulgar, to awaken interest in those, who abhor vulgarity more than oppression, and crime, and who found all their self-admiration on the rank they occupy in the social scale. Far be it from me to charge on the rich or fashionable as a class this moral degradation; but among them are the worshippers of high degree, who would think their dignity soiled, by touching the cause of the

menial, degraded race, and who load its advocates with ridicule and scorn.

Then, in the commercial class, there are unworthy opposers of Abolitionism. There are those, whose interests rouse them to withstand every movement, which may offend the South. They have profitable connexions with the slaveholder, which must not be endangered by expressions of sympathy with the slave. Gain is their God, and they sacrifice on this altar, without compunction, the rights and happiness of their fellow-creatures. To such, the philanthropy, which would break every chain, is fanaticism, or a pretence. Nothing in their own souls helps them to comprehend the fervor of men, who feel for the wronged, and can hazard property, and life in exposing the wrong. Your "Narrative of the riotous proceedings at Cincinnati," shews, to what a fearful extent, the spirit of humanity, justice, and freedom may be supplanted by the accursed lust of gain. This, however, cannot surprise us. Our present civilization is characterized, and tainted by a devouring greediness of wealth, and a cause which asserts right against wealth must stir up bitter opposition, especially in cities where this divinity is most adored. Every large city will furnish those who would sooner rivet the chain on the slave, than lose a commission, or retrench an expenditure. I would on no account intimate that such men constitute the majority of the commercial class. I rejoice to know that a more honorable spirit prevails in the community which falls more immediately under my notice. Still, the passion for gain is every where sapping pure, and generous feeling, and every where raises up bitter foes against any reform which may threaten to turn aside a stream of wealth. I sometimes feel, as if a great social revolution were necessary to break up our present mercenary civilization, in order that Christianity, now repelled by the almost universal worldliness, may come into new contact with the soul, and may reconstruct society, after its own pure and disinterested principles.

In another class, which contains many excellent people, may also be found unworthy opposers of all anti-slavery movements. I refer to the Conservative class, to those who are tremblingly alive to the spirit of innovation, now abroad in the world, who have little or no faith in human progress, who are anxious to secure what is now gained rather than to gain more, to whom that watchword of the times, Reform, sounds like a knell. Among these are to be found individuals, who, from no benevolent interest in society, but simply because they have drawn high prizes in the lottery of life, are unwilling that the most enormous abuses should be touched, lest the established order of things, so propitious to themselves, should be

disturbed. A palsying, petifying order, keeping things as they are, seems to them the Ideal of a perfect community, and they have no patience with the rude cry of reformers for the restoration of human beings to their long-lost rights.

I will only add the politicians, as another class, which has furnished selfish assailants of Abolitionism. Among our politicians are men, who regard public life as a charmed circle, into which moral principle must not enter, who know no law but expediency, who are prepared to kiss the feet of the South for Southern votes, and who stand ready to echo all the vituperations of the slaveholder against the active enemies of slavery in the free States.

For these various descriptions of selfish opponents of Abolitionism, I make no apology. Let them be visited with just rebuke. But they after all form but a small part of that great body in the free states, who look on the present anti-slavery movement with distrust and disapprobation. The vast majority in the free states who refuse communion with you are not actuated by base considerations. The fear of a servile war, the fear of political convulsions, a perception of the difficulties of great social changes, self-distrust, a dread of rashness, these, and the like motives, have great influence in deterring multitudes from giving their countenance to what seem to them, violent movements for the abolition of slavery. That a culpable insensibility to the evils and wrongs of this nefarious institution is too common in the class of which I now speak, I do not mean to deny. Still, how vast a proportion of the intelligence, virtue, piety of the country is to be found in their ranks. To speak of them slightly, contemptuously, bitterly, is to do great wrong, and such speaking, I fear, has brought much reproach on Abolitionism.

The motives which have induced me to make this long communication to you, will not, I trust, be misunderstood. I earnestly desire, my dear Sir, that you, and your associates will hold fast the right of free discussion by speech, and the press, and at the same time that you will exercise it as Christians, and as friends of your race. That you, Sir, will not fail in these duties, I rejoice to believe. Accept my humble tribute of respect, and admiration for your disinterestedness, for your faithfulness to your convictions, under the peculiar sacrifices to which you have been called. It is my prayer, that by calm, fearless, perseverance in well-doing you may guide and incite many to a like virtue.

It may be said, that it is easy for one, living as I do, at a distance from danger, living in prosperity and ease, to preach exposure and suffering to you, and your friends. I can only say in reply, that I lay down no rule for others which I do not feel to be binding on myself.

What I should do in the hour of peril, may be uncertain; but what I ought to do, is plain. What I desire to do, is known to the searcher of all hearts. It is my earnest desire that prosperity may not unnerve me, that no suffering may shake my constancy in a cause which my heart approves. I sometimes indeed fear for myself when I think of untried persecutions. I know not what weaknesses the presence of great danger may call forth. But in my most deliberate moments, I see nothing worth living for, but the divine virtue which endures and surrenders all things for truth, duty and mankind. I look on reproach, poverty, persecution, and death as light evils compared with unfaithfulness to pure and generous principles, to the spirit of Christ, and to the will of God. With these impressions, I ought not to be deterred by self-distrust, or by my distance from danger, from summoning and cheering others to conflict with evil. Christianity, as I regard it, is designed throughout to fortify us for this warfare. Its great lesson is self-sacrifice. Its distinguishing spirit is Divine Philanthropy suffering on the cross. The Cross, the Cross, this is the badge, and standard of our religion—I honor all who bear it—I look with scorn on the selfish greatness of this world, and with pity on the most gifted and prosperous in the struggle for office and power, but I look with reverence on the obscurest man, who suffers for the Right, who is true to a good but persecuted cause.

With these sentiments, I subscribe myself

Your sincere friend,

WILLIAM E. CHANNING.



